

## OBITUARY

## Ruth Roemer, 1916–2005

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Ruth J Roemer, JD, Professor Emeritus of the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) School of Public Health, Department of Health Services, died on 1 August 2005, aged 89 of cardiac failure. For over five decades she was a tireless advocate for the advancement of local, national and global health conditions and is considered a modern icon of public health. A staunch political liberal and a lifelong fighter for social justice, she was beloved by generations of students and colleagues.

Roemer's unique background as a lawyer in a field dominated by physicians made her an influential advocate and a pioneer in the nascent field of public health law. "She was a giant. She really recognized before many others the untapped potential for changes in laws and regulations to improve and protect public health," said Dr Jonathan Fielding, a UCLA professor and director of public health for Los Angeles County.

A graduate of Cornell Law School in 1939, she worked as a labour lawyer in the 1940s and 1950s. She had majored in English at Cornell University and had planned to teach, but changed her mind after touring Europe with the American Student Union in 1936.

"I came back knowing I had to do something relevant to the social conditions of the United States, and this terrible threat of fascism in the world," she said.

In the 1950s Roemer found her calling in health law when she came back to Cornell and participated in a landmark study of the law governing New York's state's admissions to mental hospitals. Her research, with Bertram Wilcox, resulted in a book that called for a transformed system in which decisions on admitting patients to mental hospitals would be based initially on medical, rather than legal, matters. Less than two years after the book was published, the New York State Legislature unanimously passed the law recommended by the study. That success "sold me on the field of health law," Roemer said in 1986. "I figured if you could get action that quickly, that was the field I wanted to be in."

In the early 1960s Professor Roemer and her late husband, the eminent Dr Milton Roemer, joined the faculty of the UCLA School of Public Health. Roemer became the principal organiser and vice president of the California Committee on Therapeutic Abortion. Her group spearheaded abortion law reform in California in 1967, six years before *Roe v. Wade*. Over the years she championed numerous public health causes including uses of fluorides for dental health, adolescent fertility, primary health care, regulation of nurses and other health personnel, and hospital patient's rights and admissions. She was a consultant to the World Health Organization for over four decades on health legislation in different countries. In 1987 Roemer was elected President of the American Public Health Association (APHA).

During the last two decades Roemer made seminal contributions to the field of global tobacco control. Roemer's understanding of the tobacco epidemic enabled her to foresee and advocate trends and possibilities that led to great contributions in health policy in this field. Her work started with a global review of legislation for tobacco control

worldwide commissioned by the World Health Organization. Her book, *Legislative action to tackle the world tobacco epidemic*,<sup>1</sup> first published by WHO in 1982, proved helpful to many countries grappling with tobacco control policies. Roemer's book, written at a time when legislation was not a focus of the tobacco control movement, educated the global public and effectively launched the use of legislation to control tobacco worldwide. At the domestic level Roemer was continuously active throughout the 1990s in shaping the American Public Health Association's policy on tobacco control.

In the early 1990s Roemer teamed up with Allyn Taylor of the University of Maryland and initiated the idea of a WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Roemer was a relentless global campaigner for the FCTC—pushing and building global support for the legal instrument in its early stages and long before there was any support for the instrument at WHO. In 1995 she co-authored the feasibility study for the WHO Executive Board that became the foundation for the WHO's first treaty. The Framework Convention, which entered into force on 27 February 2005, has now been ratified by 76 countries worldwide. Her final article, setting forth the historical account of WHO Framework Convention, was published in June.<sup>2</sup>

In her last years, Ruth remained vitally active in global tobacco control preparing a study on tobacco control legislation for WHO in 2003 and contributing to a new textbook in the field. In 2003 she received the INWAT Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of her significant contributions to tobacco control.

Roemer's extraordinary accomplishments and contributions to local, national, and global public health comprised just a small part of the remarkable person that she was. For over five decades she mentored scores of students, colleagues and friends—often redirecting their careers and working to create opportunities for them. She had a tremendous capacity to bring people together, building networks of colleagues and friends around the world. Her dinner parties were legendary and the door to her office and to her home were always open to students and colleagues alike. She was an extremely humble person who worked unwaveringly to change the landscape of public health in a quiet and unassuming way, sometimes noting "you can get a lot done in this world if you don't want any credit for it." We can be comforted that Roemer's work strengthened public health throughout the world and that her vision will live on through the countless students and colleagues that she influenced.

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## REFERENCES

- 1 Roemer R. *Legislative action to combat the world tobacco epidemic*, 2nd ed. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1993.
- 2 Roemer R, Taylor A, Lariviere J. Origins of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. *Am J Public Health* 2005;95:936–8.